

## Respectable Sinners

Peter came out of the gas station store with two bottles of Hawaiian water, handing one to Maria as she filled her tank. “You’re an angel, showing me heaven today” he said, stroking her hair slowly and whispering into her ear.

Maria smiled, nuzzled under his neck and held Peter’s hand. “You’re too good to me Peter. When will I see you again?”

“Soon sweetheart. You know I can’t live without you. I’m on a business trip this Wednesday. You can meet me in Carmel. I have a suite on the ocean for three days. I’ll make sure you have the days off.”

Maria closed her eyes and sighed. “I can’t wait. I should get back now, laundry to do.” She kissed him and finished filling her Honda Civic. Peter got into his Land Rover. They talked on their cell phones as they pulled out, smiling furtively.

Bob couldn’t hear what they were saying, but it was clear that Peter, married and Maria, who wasn’t, were having an affair. Peter was in his late fifties; Maria couldn’t be more than twenty-two. Also, Maria was Peter’s housekeeper. This was a rare glimpse into the private lives of Bob’s congregation, although he suspected this was a common situation. He headed back to the church.

Bob’s flock wore tailored clothing, drove luxury cars and ate fine food. They sent their children to the best schools. They took politically correct positions on the issues and voted for whatever candidate would maintain the status quo. They give to charity, volunteered occasionally and attended fund-raising dinners for socially approved causes. They had so many diversions to fill their lives that they hardly ever had time to think of the big picture.

It was one of those small, exclusive towns where only the fortunate few lived, where old money and new money lived comfortably side by side in homes with ocean views, nannies and housekeepers. A sophisticated system of surveillance cameras and a vigilant police force kept the residents safe; safe enough where children could play outside and walk to school alone.

But this was no Peyton Place; adults kept their affairs discreet and gossip was unheard of; in fact, talking about indiscretions would make you an outcast. Everyone was very happy to maintain a facade of respectability, not only for the children but also for their own peace of mind. After all, sin is only sin if it’s out in the open and there is always time to repent before your life is finished.

So Bob had difficulty discovering the sins of his flock. The members gave generously for services rendered, mission requests and other charitable causes he brought to their attention. No, there wasn’t any dysfunction at First Presbyterian, just a utopian community of privilege. He entered his office to see his junior pastor, Scott, preparing for a youth sermon.

“Scott, tell me something. How are the kids doing?”

“Fine pastor. I’ve never seen a better-adjusted group of kids. They seem to live an idyllic life without stress. Why do you ask?”

“I’ve been wandering around town the last few weeks and I’ve noticed some more disturbing behavior. Corruption, deceit and adultery topping the list, all from our congregation.”

“Another affair. Hmmm. That’s seven this week. Who may I ask is it this time?”

“Peter Robinson and his housekeeper Maria. I saw them at the Shell station. They didn’t notice me, but anyone could have seen them and they didn’t seem to care.”

“Well, Peter’s wife Joan is sleeping with the tennis pro at the club, often *at the club!*”

“You have confirmation of this?”

“Yes sir. The cameras are working perfectly. It’s all in our database.” Scott had managed to intercept the town’s security cameras, as well as place his own mini cameras in more private spaces indoors.

“Scott, this is the first church I’ve seen where sin is so rampant and yet discreetly hidden from others. Maybe that’s why the children seem so healthy. Usually, you’ll find the men at the club bragging about their conquests and women chatting about it in the spa or cafés, but not here.”

“I’m going out tonight to install more cameras. Four more restaurants, the new yoga center and the street artists.”

“Those musicians, jugglers and magicians in the town square? What do you hope to catch there?”

“I’ve seen some unusually large tips landing in the hats lately, along with notes folded around them and flirting, especially between the women and the magician and a disturbing flirtation between a cougar and a guitar player. And the time when they take their breaks is corresponding to these tips. Something is going on all right.”

“And how many of these people have we confirmed now, Scott?”

“One hundred and ninety three pastor, all from our congregation.”

“None from the synagogue?”

“No sir, not one. It’s all on us.”

“Well, it’s a good thing Rabbi Goldman doesn’t know about it. He would give me hell.”

“Yes sir.”

“Which brings us back to our problem. We have a congregation full of deceitful, deceptive sinners, all quietly leading very comfortable lives, making millions of dollars, both legally and illegally and sleeping with each other. But no blow-ups, no filing for divorce, no drama at all. How is this possible?”

“It’s a New Age Sodom and Gomorrah, pastor. And we’re responsible for cleaning it up. But I’ve been thinking and may have an answer.”

“Anything Scott, let’s hear it.”

“Well, preaching to them isn’t working. They don’t consider sin a problem. They think life is what you make it and the afterlife is an after thought, or no thought at all.”

“Right.”

“I’ve created aliases, anonymous characters with an untraceable email address. I call them Tom or Nancy, depending on whom I’m addressing. They send an email each day to someone in our congregation detailing their sins and hints that they are compiling evidence to deliver to the wronged individual or business. But not a threat so much as an opportunity to repent.”

“Yikes. A bit radical, don’t you think?”

“As long as we maintain our ignorance of what’s happening, I think we’ll be all right. We’ve tried to gently nudge them in the right direction on Sundays, but the sermons seem to be providing more ideas for sinning than for correcting the sinners.”

“OK Scott. Go ahead and start the emails, but don’t mass email yet, just ten a day.”

“Any particular sin we should start with? We seem to have an overlap between adulterers and business people, especially women.”

“All right. Start with those people who are committing multiple sins. Put Peter Robinson and his wife Joan on top of the list. They have three children.”

“Right. That family is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“And keep me updated on those street artists. That’s too conspicuous.”

“Is there any difference between public and private sins pastor?”

“Good question. Public sins can influence others more directly, but I think private sins are more insidious because the sinners think that there are no consequences.”

Scott broke into the new yoga center that night, the first time his military background was put to use after seminary. He placed mini cameras in the locker rooms

and in the main workout center, cleverly inserted into the fragrant fresh plants that were already in place. From there he headed to the town square to rig up some trees focusing on the area where the street artists performed. Finally at 3:00am, he broke into four restaurants and again placed mini cameras in plants facing quiet corner booths.

Scott's scheme went into effect the next day. Emails were sent out to the first group, detailing, with video clips, the transgressions he had recorded earlier. He even sent an email to a local politician whose campaign was corrupted by the opposition. Then he tracked the recipients to see if their behavior changed.

A lunch business meeting between a banker and financial advisor at one of those restaurants provided immediate results. Although neither wanted to admit to seeing compromising video of their corruption, both knew they had to adjust their methods.

"John. The reason I thought we should hold meetings here is that I'm concerned about electronic bugging at the office. This looks more like a casual lunch instead of the culmination of our Machiavellian plan to bilk investors."

"That makes sense Bill. No paper or electronic trail, just friendly talk among financial professionals. We could even say we were planning a community fundraiser for the poor."

Bill replied with a sly smile. "You mean those making less than one million dollars a year?"

John twirled the swizzle stick in his glass of Scotch. "Yes, those poor bastards. Now where is lunch? Ah, here it comes, my twenty-four-inch porterhouse, onion rings, avocado and Hollandaise sauce."

"John. Didn't your doctor tell you to lose weight?"

John wiped some sauce from his lip. "Hey, I'm having fruits and vegetables here. Besides, you only live once gentlemen. I intend to enjoy it."

A nursery deliveryman rang the doorbell of the Robinson house. Maria answered it. "Yes, what is this?"

"Plants for the home, courtesy of the club."

"Oh, they're lovely. How many are there?"

"Sixteen, one for each room. Mrs. Robinson admired them the other day. I can put them in the rooms for you."

"Thank you. Let's start upstairs and finish here."

Meanwhile, Linda Fleming, who lost the recent election for mayor, was meeting with her staff to figure out how they could go from a ten-point lead in the polls to losing on election day. "Where did our supporters go? Sally Johnson did something to turn

our voters. She's just a realtor. She doesn't have any experience in office. How did she do it?"

Her aide looked over a clipboard. "She made some promises to homeowner associations and some deals with the bank for favorable refinancing. She was able to turn a thousand voters at the last minute. We just got proof of it from an anonymous source."

"Well, we're going to strike back. If they can use technology to steal an election, then we can use it to smear her reputation. Get me that intern, Segretti's grandson."

One of the reasons that Fleming lost the election was her pollster. Instead of checking with voters before and after the vote, she was taking a nap in the adjacent building. If she had been doing her job, Fleming would have had some notice before the election was over and may have been able to counter her opponent's strategy in time. Sometimes sin takes the form of inaction.

At the yoga center, the pampered wives took their morning exercise before heading to the cafés. Scott monitored the feed from the mini cameras. One of the women passed a note to the instructor, an Italian fitness model, inside of a small towel; she discreetly opened it up, and then smiled. As she walked about the class, she paused to whisper something to her amante and touched her back. Scott had to review the digital tape in slow motion to catch the proof but the intentions between the pair were clear in any language.

That evening, people strolled the town square window-shopping the boutiques. Husbands and wives held hands while children carried ice cream cones. The salty summer air blew in from the ocean. At the entrance to the park, the street artists were displaying their skills. Jugglers, magicians and musicians performed to the crowds, while a hat for tips filled up with change and bills. Every so often, a note would drop in. A bearded guitar player winked at the fifty-something fit woman leaving her message of an upcoming rendezvous. But Scott caught it all. As the guitar player read the note, Scott's mini camera zoomed in and snapped a picture. He then relayed it to the woman's husband, the principal of the elementary school, who coincidentally was at the time doing some professional development with the new second grade teacher who just so happened to be married to the guitar player.

"What a mess" Scott said to himself. "No one would believe this if it was one of those trashy novels the women read on the beach."

The next day Scott checked the cameras he delivered in the houseplants at the Robinson home. He couldn't have hoped, or dreaded, what he discovered.

Peter cornered Maria in the bedroom cleaning up. "I need you now lover."

"Oh!" Maria said. "Peter, we've never done this here."

"Sorry. This can't wait." Peter ripped off Maria's clothing, threw her on the bed and had his way with her for the next hour.

The tennis pro dropped Joan off at her house following their lesson. “Thanks for the ride Jason. Why don’t you come in for a cold drink?”

As soon as they were in the kitchen, Joan pulled Jason to her, grinding her hips onto his. Jason was excited but worried. “Joan, we don’t do this here.”

“We do today Jason.” Both couples miraculously finished their lovemaking without running into each other. Jason went back to the club. Peter slipped out the back and went to the office. Joan took off for the spa. That night Peter and Joan had a quiet and friendly dinner with the children.

But Scott had it all on tape. He sent the compromising video clips to Peter, Joan, Maria and Jason.

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The next day, Pastor Bob got his morning coffee from the pretty barista, and then sat down to read his paper. Rabbi Goldman saw his friend and sat next to him. “Bob, how are things going?”

“You know David. I’ve discovered that you have to save the congregation one at a time.”

“Mazel Bob. Me ken dem yam mit a kendel nit ois’shepen.

“Sorry David, I don’t know that one.”

“The ocean cannot be emptied with a can.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears David.”